

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary Template



Title: What is jaundice and what does it mean for my baby?

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Plain Language Summary:

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is the name for yellow skin and eyes. The yellow color comes from bilirubin. Bilirubin is made when blood is broken down. Normally, the liver changes bilirubin so that the body can get rid of it through the gut. Newborn babies often develop jaundice because their livers are young and not able to change bilirubin like adult livers. Also, baby intestines are not able to get rid of bilirubin as well as adult intestines. Preterm babies are more likely to get jaundice because their livers and intestines are younger than most babies. Breast fed babies may also get jaundice because breast milk keeps bilirubin from leaving through the intestines.

Is jaundice dangerous for my baby?

If there is too much bilirubin in the blood, bilirubin can collect in the brain. When this happens infants can have poor sucking, a high pitched cry, be hard to wake up, and seem weak. Later, babies can become tense and arch their back and neck. In very bad cases, high bilirubin can cause coma, seizures, and death. When jaundiced babies get older, they can have problems with teeth, hearing, and moving their arms and legs.

How is jaundice treated?

Bilirubin levels can be lowered by a special type of light. Blue and green light can change the bilirubin in the skin. This change helps keep bilirubin out of the brain. This change also helps the body get rid of bilirubin. The blue light can either be given with fluorescent lights in an incubator or with a lighted blanket.



What should I do if my baby looks yellow?

Most hospitals schedule visits to your clinic shortly after your baby is born to look for jaundice. If your baby looks yellow you should call your clinic. The doctor can order blood tests to measure the level of bilirubin in baby's blood. If bilirubin is only a little higher than normal, the doctor may suggest exposing the baby to sunlight or switching to formula for a few days. If bilirubin is very high, the doctor may:

- send baby home with the lighted blanket
- check baby into the hospital for light therapy

Usually bilirubin levels start to come down 4 to 6 hours after starting light therapy. Babies in the hospital are usually there for 1 to 3 days. Most babies treated with lights have no lasting problems from jaundice.

Where can I get more information:

For more information:

Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/infant-jaundice/DS00107>

WebMD:

<http://www.webmd.com/parenting/baby/tc/jaundice-in-newborns-hyperbilirubinemia-topic-overview>

Key Words:

Newborn Jaundice

Bilirubin

Premature infant

Breast-feeding

Biliblanket

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